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THE CULTURE OF EXPERIENTIAL COMMUNITY BASED LEARNING: DEVELOPING CULTURAL AWARENESS IN PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS

Abstract

This paper describes the culture of experiential community based learning at Central College, a rural liberal arts college in Midwestern, USA. Pre-service teachers use experiential community based learning to reflect on their personal growth in understanding the needs of diverse learners. Reflections demonstrate how the program contributes to the development of cultural awareness. There is a culture of civic engagement as stated in the college strategic plan and community goals. The program is coordinated through the Center for Community Based Learning (CCBL) which acts as a liaison with not-for-profit organizations in Des Moines and other at risk locations in Iowa. Students are placed with not-for-profit organizations to give support to low income families, refugees, the homeless, immigrants; teaching English, or working with at risk children and young adults in alternative high schools and shelters. The paper presents research findings regarding the impact on college students of experiential learning. The pre-service teachers describe the challenges and learning outcomes from their out of class experiences. The study participants, in the human relations education course have to commit to fifteen hours of experiential community service. The program develops dispositions and skills for pre-service teachers to understand multicultural education in preparation for teaching in increasingly diverse classrooms. The paper presents data collated from the students' reflections, journals, research papers and in class discussions. The pre-service teachers describe the impact of working with multicultural groups to include: increased cultural awareness, a greater understanding of learner differences, and the development of empathy for the needs of diverse communities.

Keywords: Pre-service Teachers Training; Experiential Service Learning; Higher Education

Introduction

To be an effective teacher, in today's media immersed environment, there is still the requirement for face-to-face interaction to relate to and understand the real life interpersonal experiences of others. Pre-service teachers in USA are part of a global society connected electronically by media focused communities who text, tweet, post photographs, use smart phones, apps, and multiple electronic devices to share opinions, interact, comment and communicate with each other. Students research digitally and are constantly connected with instant communities of scholars, family, strangers and friends. However, teaching requires person-to-person communication, an understanding of individual differences and how to teach to encourage all students to reach their potential. The pre-service American teachers described in this paper are part of this media dependent generation of students. (Black, 2010, p. 97) The paper describes one facet of the teacher education program where the goal is to develop collaborative skills and an understanding of learner differences. The pre-

service teachers undertake fifteen hours of experiential service, placed in centers through the Center for Community Based Learning (CCBL). The CCBL program is nationally recognized, founded in 1996 in recognition of the need for civic engagement and a genuine concern for others. Support is given to low income groups, refugees, the homeless, and others in need. The campus office has a liaison with not-for-profit organizations, supporting Central's strategic plan to: "Develop a portfolio of programs to reflect Central's commitment to global and community engagement." (2012)

The State of Iowa requires all trainee elementary and secondary teachers to take a human relations course which introduces pre-service teachers to multicultural education and develop an understanding of diverse groups. An integral part of the course is the commitment to fifteen hours of community service. Pre-service teachers select a site and work with diverse groups of children or young adults in need. Reflective journals, discussions, research, pre and post experience surveys are used to evaluate the experience and to enable the students to reflect upon their contributions, observations, the benefits, challenges and stereotypical views. Reflections are guided by course InTASC standards: demonstrating an understanding of learner differences, reflection and continuous growth, and an ability to work collaboratively. The pre-service teachers reflect on how the experience contributes to their understanding of diverse communities.

Developing Cultural Awareness in Pre-Service Teachers

The Iowa State Board of Education (2012) address the need for future teachers to have "21st century skills to bridge the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of students from the core subjects to real life applications" one of which is civic literacy. To achieve these goals teacher need to be self reflective, critical thinkers, seeking meaning and explanations, not just fitting into the future but shaping it.

"The teacher of tomorrow has to be an advocate for all students accepting and promoting a learning environment with the goal of success for all children. The U.S. was founded on equality. Education is still a means to provide equal opportunity for individuals to achieve personal success and national prosperity" Droppert (2010). Central College works to train teachers to meet the needs of the increasingly diverse school population. During their four year degree program pre-service teachers are placed for over 150 hours of classroom interaction to observe and teaching at multiple grade levels. The experience described in this paper is one facet of the whole, but contributes to the development of cultural awareness and an understanding of real life teaching situations. The Cultural Awareness Survey (CCBL, 2012) a pre and post experience survey is used to document pre-service teachers' responses to the service experience, monitoring the effectiveness of the program. Samples from the survey provide narratives of students' perceptions. Statements include:

- I was not prepared emotionally to work with the group of children. Walking in and being told about their hardship was a shock. I grew a greater understanding of others, academically I was able to see examples of what my text was teaching and professionally I was able to gain skills for the future.
- I have definitely become more confident in my choice to be a teacher. I have become better with helping students.

- I learned a lot about how children interact with each other and how to work with children who have behavioral issues.

These responses demonstrate common themes of increased confidence, improved teaching skills, and a greater understanding of learner differences. Further comments are:

- I have never had experiences with children who emigrated from a country other than Mexico, so it was a good experience to interact with them.
- Yes, I felt this was a wonderful experience that allowed me to grow as a person.
- I benefitted from my experience. Personally I became close to the children and enjoyed my time there. I also feel better prepared to be a teacher and have students of different cultures in my classroom.

These responses demonstrate the growth in maturity, reaffirmation of career choices and appreciation of cultural differences. In response to the question: Has your cultural awareness been affected by your experience? If so, in what ways? Pre-service teachers wrote:

- I have developed a greater awareness of global issues and of different cultures. It made me more appreciative of what I have. It also made me more curious about other cultures and I want to learn more about them.
- I have learned to keep my mind open to people because we do not know their story.
- Yes, it was a much more diverse group than I ever went to school with. It was very eye opening in good ways.
- I definitely became more culturally aware, working with ELL students. I learned so much about their culture by working with them. It was a lot of fun and helped make me a better person and better teacher.

The experiences challenge pre-service teachers to re-evaluate stereotypical views:

- I have learned about the diversity in Des Moines and that I may have student like these kids in my class one day. I have learned a lot about inner city cultures.
- Driving through the neighborhood and some of the people coming in for food was scary.
- I had never been around people of different cultures so feel this experience opened my eyes to different cultural backgrounds.
- I worked at Las Americas, it keeps making me more culturally aware. I see different things with each visit and it helps me to understand. I do not want to stop going, Las Americas it is a great site.

The responses in journals, papers and the surveys demonstrate how pre-service teachers developed their collaborative skills, empathy, self confidence, initiative, a greater understanding of learner differences, and how to work with diverse groups. The personally documented outcomes in students' reflections reinforce research findings that experiential community based learning has positive learning and dispositional benefits, which enhance an understanding of other cultures and diverse groups.

The Culture of Experiential Community Based Learning: The Center for Community Based Learning (CCBL)

The pre-service teachers' placements, background screening, initiation and support are coordinated through the Center for Community Based Learning. CCBL focuses on developing civic responsibility for all students on campus. The partnership model fosters genuine reciprocity for civic engagement. CCBL has an interactive web site to assist students and faculty to select placement centers, and make connections between course goals and community experiences. They document student participation; coordinate and fund student transport while developing interdisciplinary service opportunities to work collaboratively with and support for community partners. The center works for the common good with ninety community partners supporting groups in distressed conditions in Des Moines and neighboring communities in five Iowa counties. The not-for-profit organizations support immigrant groups from Mexico or South America. In addition there are increased numbers of political and economic refugees, displaced families from war zones in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. Many of the families and children have been relocated to the mid-west and have no knowledge of English or American norms.

The Central campus has a culture of civic engagement. CCBL plans civic dialogues bringing students, faculty, and community partners together for discussions. Students majoring in communications, education, English, political science, psychology, sociology, Spanish, athletics and exercise science use community service as part of their academic course work. In 2012, CCBL was named a national finalist in the Presidents' Higher Education Community Service Honor roll for work to improve neighborhoods and improve educational and developmental outcomes for all children in the nation's most distressed communities.

Pre-Service Teacher Experiential Community Based Learning: Research

Pre-service teachers' reflections described working collaboratively in community organizations to be a meaningful developmental experience and found guided reflection to be beneficial. In addition to experiential service the students reviewed research articles reflecting on the positive and negative implications of service to others. The research provides a theoretical basis for the time commitment, identifying the long term benefits from participating in service to others.

Eyler and Baxton (1997) studied 1500 students in 20 colleges finding that those who participate in service learning differ in attitudes, skills, values and understanding of social issues. In response to the research a pre-service student stated: *"I agree with this attitude shift as I believe I have developed a better attitude towards serving my community with my service learning placement. I actually tutor students who have fallen behind in school and it has made my desire to help people even stronger."*

Prentice and Robinson (2010) observed that if faculty related the experience directly to the curriculum, the service learning increased the students learning in the course, teaching students to think critically and logically in real-life situations. Supporting this research a pre-service teacher reflected: *"I found myself having to*

think fast when a situation occurs at my service learning placement often over an issue I am not comfortable with." The student continued to describe the value of her experience developing empathy, compassion and an understanding of how to interact with diverse students.

Stavrianopoulos (2008) researched the impact of service learning on college freshmen finding benefits from sharing the experience as a group and car pooling to sites; with growth in personal and moral well-being; and increased levels of empathy and responsibility. Having this experience influenced students' abilities to prepare for their future careers, increasing their academic motivation and helped to develop an awareness of issues in society which students felt they can have some impact upon. This is exemplified by the pre-service teacher's reflection: *"I understand why my mentee is dependent upon me and the teachers. She does not have a stable home life...I am empathic towards her feelings and offer positive words to help her through the day."*

Chambers and Lavery (2012) stated that the service experience helps pre-service teachers to stay motivated and develop an understanding of real life experiences that can be applied to future teaching situations. This pre-service teacher supports the research findings stating: *"Our course is about discovering different culture and different worlds inside our own country that we never see when we are isolated at college, in the Midwest, or small towns. With service-learning, we are going into the real world and experiencing things that we do not see or hear about when we only hear it from our professors."*

Pre-service teachers found their experiential service learning to be rewarding and beneficial. One student stated: *"Service learning facilitates critical thinking and reflection on how experiences you have had relate to your life and also how they work to help others."*

Conclusion

CCBL provides an invaluable, efficient, and reliable service for students and faculty members coordinating and documenting experiential service learning opportunities. The pre-service teachers' experiential community service promotes meaningful interaction in preparation for teaching working in diverse classroom. The post survey responses demonstrate the positive outcomes from the out of class experiences. It is a challenge for students to go into inner city areas and work with diverse groups of children and young adults. Many of the pre-service teachers had no prior experience and do not know how to react to the life styles, cultures, and living conditions of the people they met. However, the outcomes and survey responses reflect gains to be personal, professional, and social reaffirming the benefits of the program. The pre-service teachers develop cultural awareness, empathy, self reliance, and skills they are able to apply to future teaching situations. The service learning component of the Human Relations course is a meaningful experience of mutual benefit for the pre-service teachers and the not-for-profit groups. In conclusion, in an era of media focused education it is imperative that pre-service teachers have out of class, person to person experiences to prepare for teaching in increasingly diverse schools, developing 21st century skills and civic literacy.

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